Metascience (2010) 19:101–104
DOI 10.1007/s11016-010-9346-y

BOOK REVIEW

On your feet, philosophers!

S. Fuller: The sociology of intellectual life: the career of the mind in and around the academy. SAGE Publications, London, vi + 178 pp, 2009, US$99.95 HB

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Published online: 9 March 2010

The Sociology of Intellectual Life is the latest salvo from Steve Fuller in his ongoing fight for a strongly prescriptive philosophy of science. Fuller's writing is pugnacious, passionate, and unabashedly political. He clearly detests the "underlabourer" mentality he believes prevails among his colleagues, and he draws strength and succour from such past philosophical champions as Karl Popper and Paul Feyerabend in urging contemporary philosophers to push past the narrow horizon of normative evaluation and re-embrace their lost mission as the normative legislators of moral and scientific life (p. 79).

The bogeyman behind the allegedly disastrous state of today's academy is Thomas Kuhn. Fuller claims that *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has exercised a baneful influence over philosophers, pushing them to embrace the undignified role of underlabourer, sweating down in the boiler room of modern science whilst the ship's wheel has been seized by the malfeasant hands of a neoliberal political elite bewitched by the morally bankrupt imperatives of an incorrigible global capitalism. Evidence of Kuhn's insidious influence can be seen in the proliferation of narrow specialisms within the philosophy of science—"philosophy of physics" and "philosophy of biology" are Fuller's two examples—wherein a philosopher may know more about the science in question than she does about philosophy proper. The lamentable result is a philosopher with diminished capacity to view science with a critical eye (p. 80). No doubt some philosophers of the special sciences will be surprised to hear that their career path has been shaped, in significant part, by the long arm of Thomas Kuhn. But no matter. Fuller's work is smart and sophisticated, and we should feel lucky to have him in our midst, haranguing us for what he perceives to be our intellectual sins. He is the Socratic gadfly underwriting Popper's "open society".

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Yet Fuller is not content to fight alone. He wants more philosophers to join him in his battle, to cast aside the cosiness of academic insularity and become full-blown public intellectuals. Indeed, the book expresses the irrepressible hope that the pendulum of philosophical fortunes will finally swing back his way (p. 82). And not just that: it also lays out an ambitious action plan. Fuller calls for nothing less than a radical reformation of the twenty-first-century university.

Here Fuller takes his lead from German philosopher and statesman Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). Accordingly, the book falls into three main chapters, each reflecting a part of what Fuller believes to have been Humboldt's philosophical vision: one on the university; one on philosophy; and one on intellectuals. A fourth chapter, which I will not discuss, considers the improvisational character of intellectual life.

Fuller interprets Humboldt as viewing the university as a site for the "creative destruction of social capital" (p. 36). Researchers produce new knowledge (social capital), and teachers disseminate it (creative destruction). Yet this elegant weave of research and teaching has now come unravelled through the incursion into the academy of private market interests. In today's "knowledge economy", teaching is increasingly reduced to the dispensation of employment "credentials"; research, in turn, is increasingly privatized as intellectual property (pp. 10–11). Fuller argues that this situation has fostered an inequitable distribution of knowledge, and thus violates Humboldt's original vision of the university as the production site for "universal" knowledge (p. 4). For Humboldt, the attainment of universal forms of knowledge required that public dissemination, or teaching, be integrated into the epistemic production process. In this spirit, Fuller argues that the teachability of new knowledge for the general public must be a precondition for any legitimate claim to epistemic progress (p. 33).

The brunt of Fuller's criticism is borne by the natural sciences, whose failure to include disciplinary history in their curricula discourages students from critically reflecting on the basic assumptions underpinning their fields (p. 28). Things are, according to Fuller, much better in the humanities and the softer social sciences, and especially in philosophy, where pedagogy strongly influences research trajectory by recapitulating historical debates surrounding perennial problems (p. 27). Fuller thus proposes that the entire university curriculum be reformed to bring it into line with the pedagogical tradition most clearly evident in philosophy (p. 33). This, he claims, will help bring about the Enlightenment goal of lifting citizens out of their current state of moral immaturity and equipping them for full participation in public life (pp. 39–40). Humboldt's university supplies the necessary vehicle for realising this remarkable vision, with philosophers stationed at the helm.

The only problem is that philosophers are not really up to the job. "Anglophone" philosophers, in particular, have abdicated philosophy's prescriptive function (p. 82); the professionalization and specialization of their field has caused them to retreat from public affairs and normative pronouncements (p. 63). Philosophy, writes Fuller, has become "politics in exile" (p. 54). As a result, philosophical research is at higher risk of producing "ideological wild cards available to the highest bidder" (p. 62). Once again, the culprit most responsible for this sad state of affairs is the nefarious Thomas Kuhn (p. 79).

As a foil for today's cowed academic, Fuller introduces the intellectual. The academic does not hold up well in comparison. Whilst the intellectual speaks thoughts, the academic only mimes them (p. 84). The intellectual is creatively reckless where the academic is feckless (p. 108). The academic, if she forgets to bring her Powerpoint to a presentation, is panic-stricken. The intellectual, caught under similar fire, remains cool and in control (p. 84). The intellectual cares about ideas and knows how to use them. The academic, alas, does not (p. 84). Whilst most academics are rhetorically inept (p. 141), the intellectual possesses considerable rhetorical skill (p. 93). The intellectual loathes the immodest use of citation which, Fuller tells us, blights academic writing. The academic, meanwhile, trots dutifully up to the trough, performing acts of "ventriloquism" and "argument by name-check" in an undignified display of "institutionalized cowardice" (pp. 85–86).

Of course, an academic can always join the ranks of the intellectual. In doing so, she will assume an ethic that is "exhilarating and harsh" (p. 87); she will become "a member of the political or scientific (or preferably both) vanguard whose socio-cognitive horizons are somewhat wider and clearer than those of the normal member of society"(p. 94); she will walk among those who live "exemplary lives that are admired from afar and to which lesser mortals aspire in a future incarnation"; and, through a studied sense of responsibility, she will strive to "rais[e] those mortals to their own lofty heights – if possible, in the same lifetime" (p. 94). For this, Fuller declares the academic *cum* intellectual and her fellow travellers "moral heroes", serving as "necessary correctives" to the prevailing "herd mentality" (pp. 95, 104).

How might one beat back the deleterious effects of Thomas Kuhn, curing the academic philosopher's critical anaemia, lifting her from the boiler rooms of the underlabourer and encouraging her to set her shoulder to the stone of progressive social change? How, in other words, might one "institutionalize the moral courage of the public intellectual" (p. 108)? Here Fuller delivers a spirited plea for the strengthening and restructuring of the academic tenure system, turning tenure into a "guild privilege" which "compel[s] academics to function as public intellectuals to demonstrate that they [are] worthy of their privileges" (p. 109). In exchange for their active, critical opposition to the status quo, academics will be rewarded with the luxury of freedom and autonomy within "a state-protected market for intellectual life" (p. 111). Under this simultaneously strict and emancipatory regime, critical academics would possess a precious and inalienable "right to be wrong" which guarantees their safety by enabling their ideas to die in their stead (p. 38). They would be entitled, writes Fuller, to defend such offensive claims as "that the Holocaust never took place, that Blacks are intellectually inferior to Whites, or that thermodynamics render evolution impossible" (p. 37). The only condition is that they defend their claims publicly with arguments laid bare to critical scrutiny, fulfilling what Fuller calls the "*noblesse oblige*" of the critical academic dedicated to the cause of Enlightenment (p. 133).

The Sociology of Intellectual Life offers a wide-ranging and eccentric defence of the privileges and obligations of critical practice in the twenty-first century academy. No doubt some readers will be thrilled by its ambitious attack on mainstream academia. Others will just as surely be appalled by the bucket of scorn it pours on their own professional practices. In any case, Fuller's project is finally

motivated by his assumption that the Humboldtian university offers "the most reliable vehicle for social progress in the modern era" (p. 111). Fuller never bothers to defend this claim, and the reader's opinion of the book will depend significantly on how willing she is to accept it as self-evident, and hence above critical scrutiny.